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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000009

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SUBJECT: SAUDI VIEWS ON IRANIAN AND SYRIAN ACTIVITIES IN
IRAQ AND ELSEWHERE

REF: RIYADH 00007

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JAMES C. OBERWETTER
FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (S/NF) Summary: Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal and General Intelligence Presidency (GIP) director Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz sought and shared views on Iran and Syria during a December 27 meeting with U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Khalilzad. They told the Ambassador that while it was possible to understand Iranian concerns in Iraq, that did not justify Iranian interference. The Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin maintained that Iran in fact had much to lose by fomenting instability in Iraq, given the potential repercussions among Iran's own fragmented political and ethnic milieu. They said that Saudi Arabia had begun discussions with Iran, including establishing a bilateral, Foreign Minister-level committee, to pressure Iran to end its interference in Iraq. They also discussed Iran's nuclear program with Tehran, and were surprised by the Iranians' "surprising degree of innocence." Despite the Kingdom's deep concern about Iranian activities, the Saudi leaders cautioned against threatening Iran to try to force a change in Iranian policies. On Syria, the Saudi leaders questioned the level of Syrian involvement in Iraq, and cautioned against isolating Syria, lest that strengthen its ties to Tehran. End Summary.

2. (S/NF) U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad visited Riyadh December 27 to discuss the post-December 15 political situation in Iraq (Reftel). He met first with Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal and GIP Director Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz together, and later with King Abdullah, with the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin sitting in. Riyadh Charge d'Affaires, Baghdad Political Counselor and the Ambassador's Executive Assistant, and Riyadh PolMilChief (Notetaker) attended both meetings. During their meeting with Ambassador Khalilzad, the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin also sought and shared views on Iran and Syria.

Iranian Interference in Iraq

3. (S/NF) Foreign Minister al-Faisal told Ambassador Khalilzad that the SAG had spoken to Tehran about Iranian interference in Iraq. He said the Iranians had sent former Iranian Foreign Minister Velayeti as Khomeini's emissary to meet with King Abdullah, a senior level of representation that the Foreign Minister described as unheard of but that was intended to make a point. According to the Foreign Minister, King Abdullah responded to Velayeti's claim of Iranian interest in good bilateral relations by insisting on an end to Iranian interference in Iraq. The King reportedly told Velayeti that "we believe you are doing something very dangerous."

4. (S/NF) The Foreign Minister said that so far the Iranians have denied interfering in Iraq. They have, however, agreed to form a committee, led by Foreign Minister al-Faisal and Khomeini advisor Velayeti to allow the Saudis to present evidence of Iranian interference and for the Iranians "to prove they are not doing it." Foreign Minister al-Faisal, who said the SAG would welcome any U.S. evidence to present to the Iranians, commented that this dialogue would be a test of Iran's future role in the region. The SAG was uncertain whether there would be any positive results, but the SAG had to try. It was one thing, he said, if a united Iraq was established and then developed close ties with Iran. However, Iranian attempts at interference and destabilization in Iraq were unacceptable and had to stop.

5. (S/NF) Although he stressed there was no justification for interference in Iraq, Foreign Minister al-Faisal commented that he could understand the Iranian imperative. Iran, he said, has faced war with Iraq for ten years. He also noted that Iran's self-image, as well as its perception of its regional role, responsibility, and pre-eminence, likely drove Iranian activism in Iraq. He told Ambassador Khalilzad that the way to deal with Iran was not with threats, but by convincing Iran of its role and national interest in working for a unified Iraq. Efforts to fragment

and destabilize Iraq could spill over into Iran, which has even more factions, sects, and ethnic groups than Iraq.

16. (S/NF) Ambassador Khalilzad said that Iran was overreaching in Iraq, and that there seemed to be an Iranian sense of entitlement to influence because of the Shia population and eight years of war. He commented that Tehran is very influential in Iraq right now, that Iranian leaders appeared to believe events were heading in a favorable direction and that time was on their side. He related to the Saudi leaders a report that Iranian officials had visited Kurdish leaders in Iraq, told them that Iran and not the U.S. would be a permanent presence in the region, and suggested that the Kurds needed to think about that. Ambassador Khalilzad told the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin that the U.S. had indicated a willingness to talk with Tehran about Iraq, but that there also had to be a plan to contain the Iranians and reverse their gains. He also stressed that the U.S. had specific military concerns vis-a-vis Iranian interference in Iraq, noting in particular the increased use by insurgents of shaped-charge IEDs, of a kind developed and used by Lebanese Hizballah in Lebanon.

Iran's Nuclear Program

17. (S/NF) Finally, Foreign Minister al-Faisal told Ambassador Khalilzad that Saudi Arabia had also pressed Iran about its nuclear program, both because of the dangers of regional proliferation and the danger posed to the entire region by an accident at Iran's nuclear facilities. He said the Iranians had responded to Saudi safety concerns with assurances that the facilities were very safe because "we are using Russian technology." Still clearly amazed by that statement, the Foreign Minister commented that there was a "surprising degree of innocence" about the Iranians. He remarked that the current Iranian President's only qualification for office is that he is a "Khomeiniite."

Syria - Level of Activity in Iraq, Coordination with Iran

18. (S/NF) Both the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin sought Ambassador Khalilzad's views on the both the level of Syrian involvement in Iraq and the extent to which any such involvement was coordinated with Iran. They noted Syrian denials of involvement in Iraq, and pointed out that Damascus had been complimented by the Iraqi government and even General Casey for the SARG's efforts against foreign fighters. They said that the SARG seems to feel that it has done what is necessary.

19. (S/NF) Ambassador Khalilzad acknowledged that Damascus had taken some positive steps, such as tightening visa requirements and closing parts of the Syrian-Iraqi border. He agreed that General Casey had made some statements about Syria that could be taken as positive, but cautioned that the remarks were not as positive as some wanted to believe. Ambassador Khalilzad said that despite some positive measures, Syria had not made a strategic decision to break with the foreign fighters and continued pressure was required.

110. (S/NF) Ambassador Khalilzad said that the Coalition did not have a clear view of the degree of Iranian-Syrian coordination in Iraq. Foreign Minister al-Faisal noted ongoing Syrian-Iranian cooperation in support of Lebanese Hizballah in Lebanon, but suggested that the SAG did not perceive a similar level of cooperation in Iraq. He noted that Syria is a Ba'thist state and that there was not much love for Ba'thists in Tehran. He said he doubted that Iran would want Syria much involved in Iraq because of the potential Ba'thist influence. Likewise, he commented that it would be too sensitive for Syrian President al-Asad to cooperate with Iran in Iraq because the potential for alienating Ba'thists in both Iraq and Syria.

111. (S/NF) Foreign Minister al-Faisal cautioned that the more Syria feels isolated, the more it will strengthen its ties with Iran. He maintained that the SARG was open to listening if talked to seriously. At the same time, the Foreign Minister appeared to acknowledge the difficulty of dealing with Damascus. He said the SARG missed an opportunity to leave Lebanon as "heroes." The Foreign Minister said the SAG had urged Damascus to call for a Lebanese government of national reconciliation and sign proposed border agreements. Instead, the Syrian leadership obfuscated. Now, he said, there has been too much bloodshed and irresponsibility.

Comment

112. (S/NF) The Foreign Minister's comments on Syria mirror

past statements by him and other Saudi leaders. They reflect the conflicting Saudi views of Damascus; frustration and anger with the Bashar regime, but also a deep concern that pressure and isolation could cause it to collapse, leading to a greater instability and Islamist threat in the region. Concerning Iran, the Saudi-Iranian dialogue, coupled with measures being taken to encourage unity (Reftel), suggest a SAG decision that the Kingdom must now play a role in stabilizing Iraq. End Comment.

13. (U) Ambassador Khalilzad has cleared this cable.
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